Art, Commerce and Race: The Controversial Debate on Music and Violence

Statement of Michael Eric Dyson Before
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The contentious debate about the relationship between music lyrics and societal behavior is surely controversial. The assertion that violent lyrics cause violent behavior is neither convincing nor conclusive. The obvious causes of social violence – economic inequality, racism, and racial profiling – are all but ignored when the focus is on the music of (minority) youth. Often the efforts to "objectively investigate" the roots of social violence amounts to little more than racial scapegoating of black and latino youth. In order to avoid such a measure, it is necessary to explain the origins of the most influential – and controversial – contemporary form of popular culture: hip-hop music. By examining the racial sources, social uses and musical roots of hip-hop culture, I hope to underscore how simplistic it is to blame music lyrics for social violence. And while it is most likely illegal to commercially curtail artistic expression, in light of the racial subtext of much of this debate, it is certainly unjust.

For many black and white Americans, hip-hop culture crudely symbolizes the problems of urban black youth. The list of offenses associated with hip-hop culture is culled from rap lyrics and the lifestyles they promote. The list includes vulgar language, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, sexual promiscuity, domestic abuse, parental disrespect, rejection of authority, and the glorification of violence, drug use, rape, and murder. And it's true that even a casual listen to a lot of hip-hop will turn up these and other nefarious attitudes. At least if you listen to the style of hip-hop known as gangsta rap. The gangsta

rap genre of hip-hop emerged in the late ‘80s on the West Coast as crack and gangs ruled the urban centers of Los Angeles, Long Beach, Compton, and Oakland. Since hip-hop has long turned to the black ghetto and the Latino barrio for lyrical inspiration, it was inevitable that a form of music that mimicked the violence on the streets would rise.

It was just as predictable, though not to the degree that it has happened, that a huge backlash against gangsta rap and black youth would emerge. Among the factors that made black youth culture ripe for such an attack is a general ignorance about the range and depth of hip-hop culture. Ironically, this ignorance helped make gangsta rap an economically viable music. Anti-rap crusader C. Delores Tucker can shout as loud as she wants, and she’s certainly earned the right, but she was nowhere to be found when rap group Public Enemy was at its revolutionary height calling for a united black nation to fight racism and the powers that be. True, their brand of hip-hop brushed too closely to anti-Semitism and they certainly could have used a few lessons in feminist thought. But few people quit listening to Sinatra’s “Fly Me to the Moon” (it was really named “In Other Words”, but Sinatra’s Billie Holiday-inspired phrasing was so impeccably memorable that he shifted the song’s emphasis) because of his occasional racism or his denigration of women as broads.

It’s clear that the rise of hip-hop culture has provoked a deep black nostalgia for a time when black communities were quite different than they are now. When children respected their elders. When adults, not young thugs, ruled over neighborhoods. When the moral fabric of black communities was knit together by a regard for law and order. When people shared what they had, even if it was their last crust of bread or drop of soup.

When families extended beyond blood or biology to take in young people in need of rearing. When communication between blacks on the street was marked by courtesy more than cursing. When black folk went to church, and even if they didn't, respected the minister as a source of moral authority. And on and on.

A cure for such nostalgia can be found in works like *Morals and Manners Among Negro Americans,* edited in 1914 by W.E.B. Du Bois and Augustus Dill. Du Bois and Dill surveyed hundreds of leading blacks about the "manners and morals" of black youth. Wouldn't you know it? Many black leaders lamented the negative impact of popular culture on black youth. One leader blamed moral decline on movies, which "have an unwholesome effect upon the young people. Roller skating, ragtime music, cabaret songs, and ugly suggestions of the big city are all pernicious. The dancing clubs in the big cities are also vicious." Another leader worried that black youth " hang around the corners in great numbers, especially the boys. Many of the are becoming gamblers and idlers." Keep in mind that these degenerate black youth make up a generation now praised for its high morals. That should stop us from writing the epitaph of what has been mislabeled a lost generation of black youth. (Even here, racial distinctions prevail. If white kids are demonized as "slackers", at least they're seen to be slacking off from a Protestant work ethic they can recover through hard work. What can you do when you're lost? Often, you get written off. That happens to too many black youth.)

The relation of nostalgic blacks to hip-hop culture can be viewed in the following way: there is a perception of *aesthetic alienation* and *moral strangeness* in black youth. Both of these perceptions, I believe, depend on a denial of crucial aspects of history and

racial memory. Amnesia and anger have teamed up to rob many blacks of a balanced perspective on our kids. With such balance, we might justly criticize and appreciate hip-hop culture. Without the moderating influence of historical insight, joined to what might be called the humility of memory, we end up mirroring the outright repudiation our kids face across this country.

The aesthetic alienation of hip-hop has partly to do with perception. Rap is seen as wildly differing from the styles, themes, and tones of previous black music. Well, that's true and not true. Certainly the form of hip-hop is distinct. The skeletal rap crew is composed of a DJ (disc jockey), a producer, and an MC (master of ceremonies, or rapper). (Technology has enhanced, occasionally blurred, and sometimes redivided the crew's labor over the last fifteen years.) In many cases, there are at least a couple of rappers. In some cases, there are several. The DJ commands a pair of phonograph turntables. Among other functions, the DJ plays fragments of records through a technique called scratching: manually rotating a record in sharp, brief bursts of back and forth rhythmic movement over isolated portions of a song, producing a scratching sound.

The producer has several devices at her command, including a beat box and a digital sampler. The beat box, or drum machine, is an electronic instrument that simulates the sound of a drum set. A digital sampler is a synthesizer that stores in its computerized memory a variety of sounds (a James Brown scream, a TV theme song, a guitar riff, a bass line) that are reproduced when activated by the producer. The DJ and the producer work together in laying down backing tracks for the MC. The tracks consist of rhythms,

scratches, beats, shrieks, noise, other sound effects, and loops, which are fragments of existing songs reworked and repeated in new musical contexts.

The MC, or rapper, recites lyrics in a rhythmic, syncopated fashion. The rapper's rhetorical quirks, vocal tics, rhyme flow, and verbal flourishes mark his or her individual style. In the early days of rap, MC's often simulated sonic fragments with their voices, causing some rappers to be dubbed human beat boxes. Rappers can use a variety of rhyme schemes, from couplets in tetrameter to iambic pentameter. Their rhyme schemes can employ masculine and feminine rhymes, assonantal and consonantal rhymes, or even internal rhymes. Rappers may use enjambment, prosody, and sophisticated syncopations to tie their collage of rhymes into a pleasing sonic ensemble.

But hip-hop's form joins features of black oral culture, especially toasts (long narrative poems) and dozens, to a variety of black musical styles. As Gil Scott-Heron once remarked, hip-hop fuses the drum and the world. Blues music is the style of black artistry most closely associated with hip-hop. The blues spawned stock characters within its lyrical universe, including the hoochie-coochie man, the mojo worker, the lover man, and the bald man bluesman. Their relation to hip-hop's (and '70s blaxploitation flicks') macks, pimps, hustlers, and gangsters is clear. Plus, the rhetorical marks and devices of blues culture, including vulgar language, double entendres, boasting, and liberal doses of homespun machismo, link it to hip-hop, especially gangsta rap. And in case you're thinking, "Yeah, but the blues and early jazz weren't nearly as nasty as rap," think again. There are lyrics contained in the songs of the great Jelly Roll Morton, for example, that would make Snoop Doggy Dogg wince in embarrassment. You can read Morton's lyrics

in their most distinguished place of storage, the Library of Congress. (Does this mean in the next century that that august institution will house the Dogg's Magnum Snoopus, "Doggystyle" for future generations to lap up or howl at?) Modern technology, together with the urban and secular emphases of black culture, has helped expose localized traditions of vulgar black speech – including agrarian blues, signifying, toasts, and the dozens – to a worldwide audience. And millions of blacks are angry and ashamed.

If black nostalgia has distorted the relation of postmodern black youth culture to a complex black past, this is nowhere more powerfully glimpsed than in comparing hip-hop with a high point of black modernism: jazz music and culture. Critics like Stanley Crouch and musicians like Wynton Marsalis have relentlessly attacked hip-hop culture for its deficits when compared to jazz. In conversation – in truth, they were herculean arguments between us that raged for hours at a time – neither of these gifted gentlemen has had anything good to say about hip-hop culture.

Crouch maintains that hip-hop is, in a memorable phrase comparing rap to the infamous, racist 1915 D.W. Griffith film, "*Birth of a Nation* with a backbeat". Marsalis thinks rap reflects a fascism that mars humane art. Plus, rap is rooted in a banal, mindless repetition of beat, signaling a lack of musical imagination and invention. Inspired by the likes of Ralph Ellison, but especially by Albert Murray, Crouch and Marsalis argue that the artistic possibilities of jazz – its heart pumping with the blood of improvisation, its gut churning with the blues – embody the edifying quest for romantic self-expression and democratic collaboration that capture Negro music and American democracy at their best. For Crouch and Marsalis, hip-hop negates everything jazz affirms.

Many fans of black music, including stalwarts of soul and R&B, most certainly agree. They simply add their music of preference, and perhaps their own string of modifiers, to Crouch and Marsalis's list. (That's because Aretha ain't about democracy. She's about the imperious demands of gospel genius as it baptizes and is transformed by secular sentiments. I'm not so sure that Crouch and Marsalis stand ready, however, to reciprocate. Whether Aretha, Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, Marvin Gaye, Donny Hathaway, or Al Green counts in their reckoning as much as, say, early Miles or middle Coltrane, Sarah Vaughan or Ella Fitzgerald, or Ellington or Armstrong, is highly doubtful.) Despite the issues that separate black musical purists of any sort, their shared disdain for hip-hop culture's claims to art unite them as citizens of the Republic of Nostalgia.

The only problem is that, like hip-hop, jazz has a history of cultural attack. That history has been buried under an avalanche of nostalgia that hides jazz's grittier roots. For instance, during the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance, the response to jazz by a large segment of the black bourgeoisie, black intellectuals, and black artists anticipated the attack on rap. Such responses reflected, and were partly driven by, the negative response to jazz of large segments of white society. Jazz was viewed as a cultural and artistic form that compromised decency and morality. It was linked to licentious behavior and lewd artistic gestures. With its "jungle rhythms," its blues base, its double entendre lyrics, and its sexually aggressive dancing, jazz, like hip-hop today, was the most widely reviled music of the 1920's and '30s. Headlines in respectable publications asked questions like: "Did Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?". According to the *Ladies Home Journal*, jazz was responsible for a "holocaust" of illegitimate births. A Cincinnati-based Catholic

newspaper railed against the "sensuous" music of jazz. It said that "the embracing of partners – the female only half dressed – is absolutely indecent." Blues pioneer W.C. Handy's daughter, Lucille, was sternly admonished by the Colored Girls' Circle of an elite school for "making a fool" of herself by singing and dancing her father's blues and jazz. "It [continuing to sing and dance] will be under the peril of death and great danger to yourself," the letter concluded.

Many Harlem Renaissance intellectuals detested "gin, jazz, and sex." The publications of black organizations, from the NAACP's magazine, *Crisis*, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, to the Socialist Party supported magazine, *Messenger*, edited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owens (with assistance from George Schuyler), expressed opposition to jazz as well. For many Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, jazz was not viewed as a serious artistic achievement on par with European classical music. The great irony of blacks worshiping European music is that European composers such as Richard Strauss were, at the same time, expressing profound admiration for jazz. In 1926, one of the most important debates about the relation of black intellectuals to black mass culture took place in the pages of the *Nation*, between George Schuyler and Langston Hughes. In his essay, "The Negro Art Hokum," Schuyler argued that there was no such thing as a distinct Negro art apart from American art. Schuyler said that Negro art occurred in Africa, but to "suggest the possibility of any such development among the ten million colored people in this republic is self-evident foolishness." Schuyler argued that "slave songs based on Protestant hymns and biblical texts" and "secular songs of sorrow and tough luck known as the blues" were "contributions of a caste" in certain sections of

America that were "foreign to Northern Negroes, West Indian Negroes, and African Negroes." For Schuyler, defining art in racial terms was "hokum".

Hughes's response, which ran a week later, became one of his signature essays. Entitled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes's essay lamented the veiled desire of some black artists to be white. Such artists feared their own racial identity. Hughes argued that the black middle class was denying a crucial part of its heritage by denying the "beauty of [its] own people" and that Negroes should stop imitating "Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic air, Nordic art." In their stead, he urged Negroes to embrace "the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority – may the Lord be praised." Hughes argued that the "common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself." For Hughes, the racial mountain was the inability of the black bourgeoisie to accept Negro art from the masses, Hughes exhorted his fellow Negroes to let "the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand." Hughes's words are still relevant.

By rehearsing this bit of jazz history – one that is conveniently overlooked by Crouch and Marsalis as they attack rap and proclaim jazz as America's classical music – I am not arguing that we should romanticize black folk culture. Neither am I equating black folk art and pop culture. The big business of how black culture is packaged as a commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace with billions of dollars at stake prevents such an easy equation. I'm simply arguing that all forms of black music have

been attacked both within and beyond black culture. Blues and jazz, rhythm and blues, and soul have been viewed as indecent, immoral, and corrupting black youth. To be nostalgic for a time when black music offered a purer aesthetic or a higher moral vision is to hunger for a time in history that simply doesn't exist. (Of course, another way of stating this is to say that all black music has an aesthetic appeal, and a moral vision, that will at first be assailed, but whose loss will one day be mourned and compared favorably with the next form of hated black music to come along.) When Marsalis, Crouch, and other critics perched aloft the wall of high black culture throw stones at hip-hop, they forget that such stones were once thrown at their music of preference. Bebop was once hip-hop. Ragtime was once rap. Bluesmen were once b-boys. What is now noble was once notorious.

Crouch, Marsalis, and other critics have argued against hip-hop even being called serious music. Of course, these critics hold the same grudge against latter-day Coltrane, Eric Dolphy, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Don Cherry, and almost any avant-garde jazz artist who championed unorthodox harmonies, departure from chord-based improvisations, atonal "noise", and dissonant melodies. Neither Ellington nor Armstrong, heroes for Crouch and Marsalis – and for me, too – would be today what they were when they played. To be sure, they'd still be geniuses. But the character of their genius would be greatly altered. Their relentless reach for the edge of experience pushed them to keep growing, experimenting, and improvising. Conservative advocates of jazz end up freezing the form, making jazz an endless series of explorations of already charted territory. It's a process of rediscovering what's already been discovered. Such a process led someone to remark that the problem with so much of contemporary neotraditionalist jazz is that Thelonius Monk couldn't even win the annual

contest that's sponsored in his name! The very spirit of jazz – its imperative to improvise, which can often lead into dangerous, unmapped territory – is thus sacrificed in the name of preserving the noble, heroic traditions that grow out of a specific time in jazz's history. What's really being preserved is the product, not the process, of improvisation. But that's another story.

At base, the perception of the aesthetic alienation of hip-hop culture is linked to a perception that black youth are moral strangers. I mean by "moral strangers" that black youth are believed to be ethically estranged from the moral practices and spiritual beliefs that have seen previous black generations through harsh and dangerous times. The violence of black youth culture is pointed to as a major symptom of moral strangeness. Heartless black-on-black murder, escalating rates of rape, rising incidents of drug abuse, and the immense popularity of hip-hop culture reinforces the perception of an ethical estrangement among black youth. In arguing the moral strangeness of black youth, many critics recycle bits and pieces of old-style arguments about the pathology of black urban culture. Widely popularized in Daniel Moynihan's famous 1965 study of the black family – whose pathology was partially ascribed to a growing matriarchy in black domestic life – the notion that black culture carries the seeds of its own destruction is an old idea. The argument for black cultural pathology is really an updated version of beliefs about black moral deficiency as ancient as the black presence in the New World.

Still, there's no doubt that terrible things are happening to black youth. To pretend otherwise is to ignore the obvious. Black youth are killing and being killed. Crime and violence go hand in hand. High unemployment is entrenched. Teenage pregnancy is

epidemic. How can we explain these facts? I think we've moved from a theory of moral strangeness to a theory of how power has shifted away from adults to young people in many urban homes and communities. Highlighting such a shift by no means sidesteps issues of morality, values, or responsibility. It simply gives us a handle on specific changes in black youth culture that have had a vicious effect on black life.

I think there is a *juvenocracy* operating in many urban homes and communities. For me, a juvenocracy is the domination of black and Latino domestic and urban life by mostly male figures under the age of 25 who wield considerable economic, social, and moral influence. A juvenocracy may consist of drug gangs, street crews, loosely organized groups, and individual youths who engage in illicit activity. They operate outside the bounds of the moral and political economies of traditional homes and neighborhoods. The rise of juvenocracy represents a significant departure from home and neighborhood relations where adults are in charge. Three factors are at the heart of such a shift.

The first is the extraordinary violence of American life. As historian Richard Slotkin has argued, the frontier myth at the base of our country revolves around "regeneration through violence." America renews itself at the altar of devotion to violence as a rite of national identification. It is important to remember this rite as cries go up about the exceptional violence of black youth. Black youth are viewed as innately inclined to violent behavior. The lyrics and images of hip-hop are used as proof of such a claim. Well, as strong and pungent as hip-hop is, as offensive as it can be, it is still art. It isn't life, no matter what some hip-hoppers claim about its "realness." Indeed, without

making too strong of a point of it, hip-hop's existence may be keeping a lot of black youth away from drugs, crime, and life on the streets because they get to rap about such things in the sound booth. Thank God for what other hip-hoppers derisively refer to as "studio gangstas."

It is simply dishonest to paint black youth as the primary source of violence in America. In fact, more often than not, black youth are the victims, not the perpetrators, of violence. Although they are only 5.9 percent of the population, black males account for 40 percent of homicide victims. Black men over 24 are the victims of homicide at a rate of 65.7 per 100,000. For white males in that age group, the figure is 7.8 per 100,000. Youth between the ages of 12 and 17 are the most common victims of crime in America.

There were 33,651 Americans killed in the Korean War. There were 47,364 Americans killed in the Vietnam War. There were 37,155 Americans killed with firearms in homicides, suicides, and accidents in 1990. In 1991, 45,536 Americans were killed in motor vehicle accidents. The same year, 38,317 Americans died from gunshot wounds. Now firearm incidents surpass motor vehicle accidents as the most likely way Americans will die. Among white Americans, 28.4 per 100,000 die from motor vehicle injuries; 15.2 per 100,000 die from firearms. For Latinos, 28.7 per 100,000 die from motor vehicle accidents; 29.6 per 100,000 die from firearms; 140.7 out of 100,000 black males between 20 and 24 were killed by firearms in the same year. One in 28 black males born in the United States is likely to be murdered; 93 percent of black murder victims are killed by other blacks. Firearms in the hands of young black and Latino men has clearly altered the urban landscape. Firearms have given juvenocrats the ultimate weapon of death.

The American addiction to violence, the political economy of crack, and this nation's fetish for firearms account for the rise of a violent juvenocracy. Of course, there are ethical dimensions to juvenocracies as well. Are juvenocracies corrupt? Yes. Are the people who participate in juvenocracies often morally vicious? Yes. Should the destruction that juvenocracies leave in their wake, especially in black and Latino communities, be opposed? With all our might. But unlike the culture of pathology arguments, or even arguments about black nihilism, my theory of juvenocracy doesn't locate the source of ethical erosion and moral corruption at the heart of black communities. Why? Because the behavior of juvenocrats can be explained by generic, or better, universal principles of human action. Murder, robbery, assault and battery, and drug dealing are not peculiar to black culture. They occur everywhere. A theory of black pathology or nihilism confuses the matter by asking us to believe that these problems are endemic to black communities. They are not.

Moreover, rap highlights undervalued problems. One of the most intriguing and undervalued aspects of contemporary rap is its struggle with the problem of evil. In formal theological circles, the branch of thought that addresses this question is called theodicy. Theodicy attempts to understand and explain why bad things happen to good, or at least, innocent, people. It also tries to understand human suffering in the light of asserting that God is good. How can a good God allow evil to exist and to harm her children?

Hard core rappers, including Notorious B.I.G., 2 Pac Shakur, and Snoop Dogg have all, in varying ways, grappled with the problem of evil. Interestingly, this salient dimension of hard-core rap has been overlooked, perhaps because it is hidden in plain sight. In addressing evil and hard-core rap, it is helpful to remember that theodicy also has a social expression. One of sociology's towering thinkers, Max Weber, conceived theodicy as the effort gifted individuals to give meaning to the suffering of the masses. Indeed, the appeal of King and Malcolm X rested largely on their abilities to make sense of the suffering that their followers endured. Of course, King's and Malcolm X's theodicies had vastly opposed orientations. King argued that the unearned suffering of blacks would redeem American society. Malcolm believed in mutual bloodshed: if blacks suffered, then whites ought to suffer as well. More recently, black leaders as diverse as Colin Powell and Louis Farrakhan have urged blacks to take more responsibility in dealing with the suffering in their communities. Hard-core rappers, by contrast, dismiss such remedies. They celebrate the outlaw as much as they denounce the institutions they view as the real culprits: the schools, churches, and justice system that exploit poor blacks. Paradoxically, the fact that rappers are struggling with suffering and evil proves that in fact they are connected to a moral tradition, once championed by King, that they have seemingly rejected. Moreover, the aggressive manner in which rappers deal with evil – putting forth images that suggest that they both resist and embrace evil – is disturbing because it encourages us to confront how we resist and embrace evil in our own lives.

The suffering masses that concern hard-core rappers are almost exclusively the black ghetto poor. According to many gangsta griots, the sources of this suffering are economic inequality, police brutality, and white racism. These forces lead to a host of

self-destructive ills: black-on-black homicide, drug addiction, and the thug life that so many rappers celebrate and, in a few cases, embrace. For instance, in his "The Ghetto Won't Change," hard-core rapper Master P expresses the widely held belief among blacks that the carnage-inducing drug trade flourishes in the ghetto because of government complicity and white indifference. On "Point Tha Finga," Tupac Shakur gives voice to the rage many blacks feel when they realize that their hard-earned wages are subsidizing their own suffering at the hands of abusive police. For Shakur, the ethical line drawn between cops and criminals is even more blurred by the police's immoral behavior.

But blurring the lines that divide right from wrong is what seems to set these urban theodicists apart from their colleagues in traditional religious circles. Even Martin Luther, who shook the foundations of the Catholic church, dropped his moral anchor as he launched his own theodicy in the form of a question: "Where might I find a gracious God?" As Luther understood, the purpose of a theodicy is, in Milton's words, to "justify the ways of God to men." This is especially true when a God whom believers claim to be good and all-powerful allows evil to occur. The problem with most thuggish theodicies is that their authors are as likely to flaunt as flail the vices they depict in music. Unlike traditional theodicists such as King, hard-core rappers maintain little moral distance from the evil they confront. Instead, they embody those evils with startling realism: guns, gangs, drugs, sexual transgression, and even murder are relentlessly valorized in the rhetoric of gangsta rappers. Although gangsta rappers are not the only popular cultural figures to do that, their words provoke a special outrage among cultural critics. For instance, although the 1996 film *Last Man Standing*, starring Bruce Willis, was filled with gratuitous violence, it was not denounced nearly as much as Snoop Doggy Dogg's equally

violent 1993 album, *Doggystyle.* Neither did the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *True Lies*, which was swollen by crude ethnic stereotypes, come in for the bitter attack aimed at Tupac Shakur's "2Pacalypse Now." When it comes to guns, we still feel safer when they are in the hands of white men, even if they are thugs.

Moral ambiguity is at the heart of hard-core rap's struggle with evil. When it comes to dealing with that idea, hard-core rappers are treated far differently by critics than are the creators of gangster films. In *The Godfather*, for example, Francis Ford Coppola's characters pay lip service to a code of respect, loyalty, and honor. Still, they are ruthless murderers. Coppola is considered a brilliant artist and his characters memorable creations. The hard-core rapper and his work are rarely credited with such moral complexity. Either his creations are taken literally and their artistic status denied, or he is viewed as being incapable of examining the moral landscape. It is frightening for many to concede hard-core rap's moral complexity.

With that, we end up where we began: the rise of juvenocracy has been complemented by the cultural fascination with, and revulsion to, the pop culture of black youth, especially hip-hop. For many critics, the two go hand in hand. But that's a mistaken perception. That's not to say that gangsta rappers, for instance, don't identify with real gangsters. That they don't feed off one another. That their styles and social aspirations are not easily confused. Still, most real gangsters don't listen to gangsta rap for inspiration to do what they do. They check out old-school grooves. Too many of them have said so for us to ignore it. A lot of gangsters prefer Al Green to Snoop Doggy Dogg.

Too often, then, black youth are all lumped together – in the media, in discussions by black intellectuals, in the analyses of cultural critics, and in the public imagination.

Unlike Ralph Ellison's character in his famous novel, and the bulk of black folk for a long stretch of our history, black youth suffer, not from invisibility, but from *hypervisibility.* The surplus sighting, and citing, of young black bodies – in crime stories on the news, in congressional hearings about demeaning imagery in pop music, in shopping malls where they hang out, in police profiles where they are stigmatized, in suburban communities where they are surveilled – has draped paranoia and panic around their very limbs. In all wrong ways, black youth are overexposed. (Is it any wonder, then, that they dress in oversize clothing to hide their demonized bodies, to diminish the measuring of their alleged menace?)

And unlike James Baldwin and generations of black folk, black youth don't suffer from namelessness. They suffer from *namefulness*, from too many names. The sheer nameability of black youth, the ease with which they are mislabeled, promotes young black youth a negative solidarity, a unity produced by the attacks they have in common. Like Thomas Hobbes, black youth understand that human beings wield power through calling names and avoiding names. As Hobbes knew, black youth also know that names venerate and vilify. Names influence events. Hip-hop culture has provoked the naming, really the misnaming, of black youth: sadistic, self-destructive, violent, brutal, narcissistic, nihilistic, pathological, immoral, and, for some, evil. Hip-hop has fought back. It uses strategies of naming, renaming, unnaming, and overnaming its own culture and the cultures – racist, rich, elite, bourgeois – against which it strives.

Instead of nostalgia, we need serious, rigorous analysis and critical appreciation of black youth. Instead of attacks on hip-hop culture, we need sharp, well-informed evaluations of its artistic statements and ethical imagination. Black nostalgia must be replaced by an even stronger force: the historic black determination to remain undefeated by pessimism from within black culture, and paranoia from beyond its borders. We must not be prisoners of our present circumstances, of current events. We must be prisoners of faith.